



Abstract: Returning to Sam Shepard's critically-panned *Kicking a Dead Horse*, Blake Westerlund's "Sentimental Claptrap: Lost Cowboys, Dead Horses, and the Discarded" explores class and mythology in the play with an eye toward rehabilitating its reputation as tired and banal. Westerlund undertakes a close reading of the play's central character to demonstrate how notions of trash and trashiness are applied to the Western and nostalgia for a bygone era of unfettered domination. Examining Shepard's use of visual art and symbolism, this article contrasts dominant and conflicting expressions of sophistication and cosmopolitanism with the brutalities and simplicities of life

on the frontier.

Shepard's use of trash and trashed culture is at the heart of his complex attempt to play with, redefine, and dismiss dominant notions about the American West.

"Sentimental Claptrap":

Lost Cowboys, Dead Horses, and the Discarded in Sam Shepard's Play *Kicking a Dead Horse*

Blake Westerlund



In *The Theater of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis*, Stephen J. Bottoms discusses the dramas of Sam Shepard by cleverly revealing elements of the playwright's life with illuminating critical interpretations. Among his many critical insights into Shepard's dramas, Bottoms notes how Shepard's work focuses on "the tortured question of personal identity" as one of his most "insistent thematic thread[s]" (12). For many of Shepard's characters, they must undergo an almost mythic quest to truly define themselves. Bottoms traces a pattern in Shepard's work: "[t]he urge toward self-expression, of course, is predicated on the

assumption that there is indeed an authentic inner self to find expression, as distinct from the exterior, socially conditioned personality” (13). Bottoms’s sharp observation is applicable to almost all of Shepard’s various plays and dramas, and it also emphasizes the playwright’s ability to “tinker” with mythic narratives.

The question of identity is a complicated one when examining Shepard’s plays. Even when considering the rootlessness of the prodigal son of Vince or the alcohol saturated grandfather Dodge in *Buried Child*, or the nearly lethal sibling rivalry festering between Austin and Lee in *True West*, few can compete with the tortured, indecisive soul of Hobart Struther in the play *Kicking a Dead Horse* (2007). This play consists of an old man (recently retired from dealing art in Manhattan) who returns to the West of his youth only to find himself lost and tasked with the morbid job of burying a beloved (but sadly bloated) companion: his horse. In a review of the play, Miriam Felton-Dansky notes “[t]here is a futility, Shepard suggests, not only in the American quest for identity but in the language itself” (108). Felton-Dansky’s review cuts to the core of a central conflict in this play. While Shepard’s audience readily identify with familiar forms of the American West and the quest for identity, do these images and ideas still remain provocative and relevant today? I agree with Felton-Dansky’s point. But, I would also humbly suggest that part of Shepard’s artistry is how he cleverly utilizes commonplace Western images and quests to provide, albeit briefly, a sense of surefootedness for his audience; then, once that stability has been

established, Shepard suddenly interrogates (or even trashes) its value to underscore the elusiveness of the Western image. Put another way, Shepard baits his audience by presenting and holding onto Western images and mythos initially only to let them go.

A search story for identity is a fairly universal trope and not too hard to come by in most texts. Many critics of Shepard say very little when it comes to praise for *Kicking a Dead Horse*. Most critics feel the play relies too heavily on well-worn Shepardian themes such as family dysfunction, failed fathers, and overall domestic discord. In “Horse Can’t Head into the Sunset in Sam Shepard’s New West,” respected drama critic Charles Isherwood notes that “*Kicking a Dead Horse* is a disappointingly arid lament for America’s lost ideal and despoiled frontiers, a blunt position paper from a playwright whose best writing is rich in mystery and oblique but potent imagery.” Isherwood is a respected and astute critic of the theater; however, his dismissal of the play as a “blunt position paper” misses the mark within the context of the New West and how it demystifies classic Westerns’ appeal to myth and nostalgia and where audiences of the legendary “Old West” seem enraptured by elevated and heroic narratives. Yet, when one surveys the modern post Westerns popular today by writers such as Annie Proulx and Cormac McCarthy (contemporaries of the Shepard and Western fiction), the soft nostalgia of the West are foregone for sharper edged stories that are brutal, grim, and “blunt” in their retelling of the West. Isherwood is not alone in his criticism, yet these critiques appear rather hasty. Isherwood’s critique on the

theater of the play makes sense, but his evaluation of what Shepard is attempting to accomplish within the genre of the modern West begs further exploration.

Nowhere in Shepard’s body of work does one see the cowboy playwright so bold in basing the entirety of the drama in the very Western setting he has spent a large majority of his career mythologizing and demythologizing. What makes Sam Shepard’s drama *Kicking a Dead Horse* highly intriguing—even more so than the living room antics of Dodge, Tilden and Vince in *Buried Child* or the kitchen chaos of Austin and Lee in *True West*—is how Shepard simultaneously relies on standard myths or tropes of the Western setting; however, once the standard myths or tropes are set, the playwright then subverts them leaving his dilapidated cowboy Hobart Struther to pick up the pieces and salvage the significant and redemptive aspects of art through a silent dancing muse and enduring music.

Struther, an aging and wealthy successful art dealer, is at a crossroads. The life and times of the big city now pale in comparison to his youthful days working the prairie and living a life he construed as real and “authentic” (12). Unfortunately, Struther’s carefree days of cowboying are tainted by, of all things, the spoils and comforts of capitalism. Struther’s city life separates him from his past on the prairie as he enthusiastically pursues a lucrative rewarding profession in dealing art from the West. Before he “made it” in the art world of commerce, Struther found himself swaggering in and out of dusty

saloons where he noticed Western art (the work of Frederic Remington and Charles Russell) “forgotten—just hanging dusty and crooked above the whiskey” (20). With an eye for Western art and a sharper eye for enterprise, Struther drops his lasso to become an art dealer snapping up a Western artifact for twenty dollars and then “turn[ing] that twenty into a hundred grand, that hundred grand into a million” (20). With each successful sale by Struther, his connection (and recollection) of the place he once came from blurs. Unfortunately for Struther, the frontiers of the Great Plains are forgone for the urban sprawl and decadent squalor of Fifth Avenue.

For Struther, the aesthetic appeal of “saloon art” grants him more than humble returns as he morphs from prairie cowpoke into Manhattan art dealer; however, the magic in this sleight-of-hand by Shepard is not so much the character, but the object itself—Western art. The Remingtons and Russells Struther acquires in broken-down road houses and sour smelling saloons are merely wall ornaments to the whiskey drinking, working class clientele; yet for Struther, the weathered paintings that adorn these questionable establishments is so much more. The paintings are texts of rich meaning, celebrations of a bygone era, and art waiting to be appreciated in both critical and commercial realms. The texts once thought to be dead and decaying behind bars have now, thanks to Struther’s intervention, been reappraised, and the art is rejuvenated and regenerated for an audience soberly aware of its merit and monetary rewards. Clearly, one cowpoke’s trash is another art collector’s treasure.

Stranded on a prairie seeking regeneration, and in dire straits due to overfeeding his now deceased horse, Struther now (in a seemingly endless dialogue with himself and a captive audience) reflects on his urban existence, surrounded by the disposable world of cash and commodity—a world he finds in retrospect to be barren and soul killing. Struther had settled into a successful life of marriage, children and Park Avenue prestige. Yet as a newly appointed empty-nester, no longer passionate for his profession, he reflects on a desperate life:

Pathetic stuff. Truly. Impotent. What's there to do? ... constant pacing all hours of the day and night, talking to myself—which is no surprise—and then sudden, unpredictable bursts of fury where I'd rip valuable objects of art off the walls and hurl them out the windows into the lush canyon of Park Avenues: Frederic Remingtons wrapped around the lampposts, for instance; Charlie Russells impaled on bus stop signs, crushed by maniacal yellow taxis. (19)

This passage is replete with meaning about life's purpose, the meaning of art, and the toll of a disposable culture of commerce. Struther no longer finds worth in either himself or the art he discovered. His aesthetic and overall sense of self is lost as he tries to communicate to any and all who listen how what once held wonder for him is now relegated to waste. Struther's description of “wrapped” Remingtons and “impaled” Russells being crushed by the speeding yellow taxis is akin to a surrealist nightmare.

This troubling image of desecrated art demonstrates Shepard’s playful artistry with the West and its familiarity with his audience. The paintings are rare, rich, and injected with the romantic and heroic imagery of the West. They are bold and if not appealing to the beholder, at the very least, difficult to dismiss. Shepard’s audience clings to the image laden paintings only to then see them skewered by the bus stop sign or demolished by New York’s own signifier: the big yellow taxi.

When one considers the experience of this distinctively American playwright it is no surprise that Shepard references the “big names” of the visual arts in his plays. In *Buried Child*, Shelley chides Vince (before entering and meeting his family) that the house reminds her of something out of “a Norman Rockwell cover or something” (44). Sometime later, after some eerie discussions with Dodge and awkward interactions with his offspring, Shelley judiciously flees a home best described as a haunted house. Rockwell’s charming images of the everyday ho-hum world of Americana no longer apply in the turbulent domestic setting of *Buried Child*, and much like the twisted and torn Remingtons and Russells in *Kicking a Dead Horse* littered about Manhattan, Shepard uses the art to skewer the manmade myths of America.

In *Kicking a Dead Horse*, I would contend that the invocation of art in this drama is even more striking than that of *Buried Child* due to this genre’s attempt to go beyond the folksy setting of Americana and capture the frontier mythology of the West. In “What We Talk About

When We Talk About Western Art,” Brian W. Dippie asserts that “[t]hrough most of the twentieth century western art was appreciated not for its imaginative powers but for its factual value as a documentary record of nineteenth-century western life.... Accuracy was everything” (264). Dippie’s emphasis on the Western painting’s genre as a chronicle, and a record of precision no less, complements Struther’s obsession with the “authentic” and his fascination with the one and true West. Dippie’s assessment of this genre’s painting, and its attempt to capture the “real” West, illuminates Struther’s fascination with Remington and Russell. Before Struther even could comprehend the attraction to the authentic experience, he pursued it in the oils and canvases of the West’s masters. The Western painters were trying to deliver the very same thing he sought, the ever-elusive authentic experience.

Through his brash commodification of Western art’s regalia, Struther’s financial rewards grant him a life of leisure, security, and disappointment. Yet, the city’s routine wears on Struther. He falls deeper into urban depression and realizes that one approach to regaining his sense of health, inner self-worth, and “AUTHENTICITY” (12) is to return to the Badlands and become new and complete. The entirety of the play depicts the aged Struther laboring away at digging a grave for his recently departed horse, musing on life’s vicissitudes and dissolution. In a futile attempt to recapture his innocence and authenticity, Struther focuses his gaze on the West and returns to it only to find his own ruination.

This transformative and regenerative pipe dream of Struther’s is a common motif in Western texts. In *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, a seminal critical work on the genre, Jane Tompkins notes that the West,

seems to offer escape from the conditions of life in modern industrial society: from a mechanized existence, economic dead ends, social entanglements, unhappy personal relocations, political injustice. The desire to change places also signals a powerful need for self-transformation. The desert light and the desert space, the creak of the saddle leather and the sun beating down, the horses’ energy and force—these things promise a translation of the self into something purer and more *authentic*, more intense, more real. (4, emphasis added)

Tompkins’s descriptive prose accentuates the tactile attraction of the West, and the power of transformation it promises. In the art world, Struther loses touch of the saddle and the demands of the frontier he knew as a youth; now, Struther can only vaguely recollect memories of the West long gone. In an attempt to escape from the dulling “mechanized existence” Tompkins describes, Struther flees from urban sprawl, and its baggage of daily deadlines, familial responsibility, and urban paralysis. In his mind, only the rigorous life of the West can provide for him a genuine existence. Or so Struther believes. Despite his exile from tumult and art, both tumult and art follow him right out to the deadly prairie.

While Struther labours with the near impossible task of burying his deceased horse, the drama wastes little time in debunking the romanticized versions of the Wild West. Shoveling away in the hot sun, Struther frustratingly laments the loss of his horse (on the very first day of his journey no less) and addresses the audience:

“Now what? Nothing—nowhere—here I am—miles from nowhere. Only one day into it and bottomed out. Empty—badlands—horizon to horizon. No road—no car—no tiny house—no friendly 7-Eleven. Nada. Can’t even track back where I could’ve left the truck and trailer” (10).

Struther sees in front of him a prairie of absence. Unlike his, and his audience’s, earlier recollections of the Saturday matinee Western vista—bursting cinematic compositions full of limitless miles of landscape and opportunity—this landscape belies the grandeur often described (and often believed) in Western fictions. The effect of this modern and more real appraisal of the land leaves both Struther and his audience befuddled.

What was once a space of limitless opportunity actually becomes a land of negation and abandonment. Despite Struther’s glory days of true-to-life cowboying, he can no longer reconnect with his past in his all too desperate present (and fatal future). Despite his horse’s death from over-feeding (a commentary on today’s consumerist culture of gluttony), Struther wants to believe in the myth of the West, that the arid region’s ruggedly beautiful aesthetic will serve as a panacea for his ailing and aged body. He, the man of the plains, will be

miraculously real and reborn thanks to his rediscovery of the true West. Struther has fallen for a fallacy seen in the popular Saturday matinee Westerns starring John Wayne, and embraced by “true believers” of conventional masculinity. But the church Struther has returned to is empty, and its doctrines—for his immediate and dire situation—are no longer applicable. The *real* wide open spaces now seem strange to Struther who clearly is more suited to be at home in front of a Western painting than in the formidably ominous environment of the West.

Struther asserts that the cowboy past of his youth—with all of its laborious toil—provided for him a sense of what is real. Out in the pasture, far from the mahogany desks and endless lunches among the power elite and his excessively lucrative hobby of wheeling and dealing on the West’s art, Struther initiates a search story for the grit and elbow grease he once knew in his youth. His work in the old days proves to be rigorous but also tactile—an exercise he can feel and touch, as well as an admirable trait he sees in his former self.

Struther postulates:

Back in the days of AUTHENTICITY, when I “rode for the brand,” as they say: mending fences, doctoring calves, culling cows. Right here, as a matter of fact. Not too far. Out toward Blessing. Valentine. Up past the White River.... “Greasy Grass Country” is what the Ogala used to call it. Crazy Horse was killed right near here, you know. Not too far. Right nearby.... Not unlike Christ, when you come right down to it. (41)

This passage is emblematic of Struther’s search for the inner self that Bottoms observes when considering quest and identity; the passage also displays Shepard’s ability to reveal the trappings of myth and nostalgia. The language becomes a fluid and slippery movement of ideas resonating in Struther’s psyche—from the concrete belief of work (mending fences, doctoring calves, and culling cows) to the hazy geography of place, and onto the tragic genocide of the American Indian, or as Ken Kesey noted in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, “the vanishing American” (63). Struther’s observance of Crazy Horse’s resting place being “not too far” and “right near here” (41) shows Struther’s geographic and mental instability as he tries (in vain) to pinpoint his history of what is real. At this juncture, the paintings, packed away in the elite halls of museums and the stuffy private collections of upper Manhattan are now just as intangible and lost as Struther’s ancient prairie recollections. Struther’s career as an art dealer no longer exists, and he cannot return to the work that energized him as a youth on the prairie.

In a unique manner, Shepard’s play asks its audience to consider work and what it represents to us, how it shapes us, and how we are defined by it. By most accounts, Struther would be seen as a formidable and successful man in modern times. His uncanny ability to first see beauty, and then its commercial rewards in the old West’s artifacts, affords him a life of relative leisure and respectful notoriety. Yet this new occupation of dealing in art, with the objects that constantly remind him of the road less taken, haunts him as he lives

an empty life unchallenged and unfulfilled. Sweating away at the task at hand, burying his dead horse, Struther takes a moment to recall his past life in the urban environment:

Oh yes, I had become quite the big-ass success, no less. No question about that. Quite the big shot on the block. But somewhere along the trail the thrill of the kill had eluded me. The *ecstasy* of power—and now there was a kind of constant hankering for actuality. Hankering? How else can you put it? The sense of being inside my own skin. That’s what I missed. That’s what I missed more than anything else in the world. (16, emphasis in original)

This passage profoundly captures Struther’s struggle with the grim challenges of the past and his current state of affairs. Struther’s language reflects his yearning for the prairie life he left long ago. Phrases such as “the big shot,” “somewhere along the trail,” “the thrill of the kill” and of course “hankering,” all echo the tight-lipped-language of a lonesome cowboy of the trail. At this juncture of Struther’s life, his words appear to be an inadequate attempt to recapture the authenticity he desperately seeks; at worst, his words remain hollow and are easily dismissed as ineffective bravado.

It is this language, land, and fatal task that contribute to Struther’s inability to immerse himself in the environment; in addition, now that he has successfully sold off his business, personal belongings, and lucrative art career out East, his new found liberation has left him with little hope of returning to the urban business world. He is now

floating. The land he cannot reconnect with (and one wonders if he ever really did), and the bustling entrepreneurship of art offers him no solace. The Remingtons and the Russells are fine to look at, and conveniently quick to sell for a handsome profit; sadly though, the art invokes nostalgia and acts as a catalyst to cloud and obfuscate our old cowboy’s recollections. Struther remains, both literally and figuratively, Shepard’s embodiment of “a man without a horse.”

Although we often are told to avoid cliché, this one proves quite appropriate for Struther’s fate. This horseless art dealer addresses one of the many crises resonating in Bottoms’s work. Bottoms asserts that though many of Shepard’s characters undergo a search for self-expression “there is also a recurrent fear in Shepard’s work that the depth model of interior self within the exterior appearance might in fact be a fallacy” (13). Bottoms asks, “What if there really is no inner self to be ‘true’ to, only roles to invent? What if the very idea of a personal essence is merely a fiction concocted by the surface personality to give itself the stabilizing illusion of depth?” (13–14). This last question is what must eat away at the very core of Struther. What if all of his insistent queries for what is authentic are only attempts to conjure some nonexistent ideal?

The sobering question of what is true, and what is real, is quickly clouded over nearing the drama’s conclusion by nothing short of the miraculous appearance of a seductive female apparition “*dressed only in a sheer slip*” and sporting on the top of her head Struther’s cowboy hat (43). Whether the nameless Young Woman is a specter of the

prairie, a device of the absurd, or a mirage created from an overtaxed and tired mind (or perhaps all of the above), the dancer’s poetic movements remind the audience of Struther’s situation. This contrasting image is effective if we consider what Struther is working on before she appears: throwing away all of the Western accouterments of days long gone. As Struther’s situation becomes clear, he reasons to himself that he must simplify and strip down to the bare essentials:

How are you going to carry all of this out of here without a horse?
Get rid of it.

Like what?

The saddle for instance. Toss it down the hole.

The saddle? Bury the saddle?

The horse is dead.

True, but—

Toss it.

...

Just toss it. You’ll get over it.

*Hobart throws the saddle down into the pit, a resounding thud;
looks after it, fondly. (34)*

The saddle is a poignant symbol and serves as an artifact of the Old West, no longer essential in today’s world and no longer useful for the now horseless Struther. Struther’s decision to throw away the baggage of the West is more than mere sentimental spectacle. Unlike his consistent prairie palaver, he now actively attempts to

contextualize his precarious position between memory and reality. With each Western *accoutrement's* disposal, Struther strips away a life and myth or belief system he long ago considered true and sacred. But the gesture is not in its entirety without pathos, as Shepard's stage directions note he watches the saddle's disposal “*fondly*.”

One could say that this is Struther coming to a melancholic moment of realization. His days, like the frontier surrounding him, are not endless and full of nostalgia but numbered, short, and exceedingly shrewd. Struther's disposal of the saddle is a *memento mori* for him and his audience. Yet, his look could also suggest how, contrary to his metropolitan days as an art dealer where collecting objects and commerce are essentials to survival, here his tossing away of the saddle marks the end of simpler and truer times. If so, then Struther now sees the entire enterprise of the romanticized Western mythology as a series of disingenuous actions and erroneous narratives he is more than ready to throw away like yesterday's news.

Immediately after Struther rids himself of the saddle, his horse's bridle, and some handmade Garcia Spurs are soon to follow (34–35). Discarding the spurs, Struther laments “You can't find them anymore” (35). Struther's small assessment of the hard-to-find spurs addresses the finality of the drama and the act of discarding. In this minor aside, and seemingly routine gesture, easily missed (the spurs fall after the saddle but before the hat), the words apply to the extinction of all things, but more specifically the Western myth of endless frontier, the

nobility of the Western narrative with its dashing heroes, and Struther’s “heroic” quest. Unlike the neglected and nearly trashed Remington and Russell art pieces now cherished and sought after, Struther will not be rediscovered and salvaged. He will be among the cultural bric-a-brac tossed aside like his saddle, spurs, and hat.

But nothing lasts forever, and neither does Struther’s hat. When we consider the construction of the pop culture cowboy (which, as historians of the West have long noted, bears little resemblance to the actual cowboy) there appears to be a holy trinity of cowboy construction elements—a horse, a hat, and a gun. No guns show up in this drama, but the horse is long gone, and the hat is headed that way. When Struther begins to chuck these materials he moves with relative ease and alacrity, but the hat is a different story. Here, he begins an internal battle over whether to toss or not toss the beloved hat, characterizing it as more than just a garment of function and fashion:

What about the rain and wind?

You can’t predict it.

What about the whole idea?

Which one’s that?

The West? The “Wild Wild West.”

Sentimental claptrap.

...

I—can’t. (36–37)

The wind, the rain, and the mighty mythos behind the West with its heroes, theatrical showdowns, and riding off into the sunset, are encapsulated by a single hat that Struther favours greatly. The hat may as well be the cosmos for Struther, and it also serves as an umbrella-protector to Struther’s belief system. Tossing the hat aside is no small thing; it is an acceptance of the almighty horse-grave-abyss and the ultimate act of renunciation for what Struther believed to be real and perhaps even sacred.

There is even more to this hat trick performed by Shepard. When we consider the “classic” Western films we see the popular appeal of Westerns—simple dichotomies. A white hat is good, a black hat bad; a hero is wholesome, a villain demonic; an individual is honest, corporations corrupt. And so on. These Saturday matinees were mass produced, and due to the genre’s setting being conveniently found in Hollywood’s backyard, plenty were made and the Western genre thrived. Quick action, simple romance, speedy justice, and sublime vistas were the ingredients often employed to cook up a Western film. Yet, despite all of its appeal, the Western understandably fell out of favor—somewhat like the Remingtons and Russells that Struther discovers in the dives—for the very things that made it popular. Racism, violence, and cultural imperialism became disagreeable factors, but factors well worth studying and discussing when one considers the impact of the Western genre. The Western is not as simple as Struther thought. There is complexity underneath this hat.

Contemporary historians and New Western authors alike mostly eschew the Hollywood cowboys of yesterday as well as their simplistic stereotyped plots of the early Western narratives. Indeed, work done by historians such as Patricia Nelson Limerick, Richard White, and Michael Malone reconsiders the West from a wide array of geographical regions and underrepresented voices. In his essay “A Longer, Grimmer, But More Interesting Story” Elliott West recasts the West and its past in a more egalitarian light. He notes that the New West narratives dismiss a single, homogenous story in favor of a plurality of stories from all walks of life, race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. West’s more contemporary appraisal of the topic notes how,

Western history... feels different, for want of a better term, when told through these new themes. Under the old frontier interpretation, the story shimmered with a romantic, heroic glow. Suffering and tragedy were redeemed by the glorious results presumed to have followed—the nurturing of American individualism and democracy and the coming of a civilized order into a wilderness. The new themes, by contrast, emphasize a continuing cultural dislocation, environmental calamity, economic exploitation, and individuals who either fail outright or run themselves crazy chasing unattainable goals. (105)

In an orderly fashion West cleverly outlines the heroic and romanticized trends of yesterday’s Western for the more culturally and politically engaging themes of present day.

What makes West’s observation even more enlightening is how the romance of the Old West, as well as the cultural dislocation and unattainable goals of the New West, all fit neatly under the same hat sported by Struther. Is he a beguiled cowboy reveling in the supposed glory and suffering of the mythic prairie, or a culturally dislocated misfit too old and too strung out to see the world for what it truly is? Unlike the tried and true Western narratives where the good guy always wins and rides off happily into the sunset, Struther’s fate resists closure as Shepard tinkers with the classic imagery of the West.

This ambiguity all rests under the central symbol of the cowboy hat now perilously close to being scrapped, and the romantic mythology connected to it. In the perceptive essay “Holy Ghosts: The Mythic Cowboy in the Plays of Sam Shepard,” Mark Siegel explores the Western and its mythical impact on the playwright’s drama. Siegel contends that,

[i]n a great deal of his drama, Shepard has taken it upon himself to explore the possibility of new myths for our time, most frequently returning to the roots of so many American myths, the Old West....[A]lready one of the most critically acclaimed playwrights to come out of the West, [Shepard] harkens back to the very roots of Western drama and waters these roots with some of the most radical dramatic technique employed in contemporary theater. (236)

Siegel’s work frames Shepard’s dramatic and creative process as he takes the vehicle of drama to address the inner turmoil of character and culture with “radical technique” and potent imagery.

Perhaps one of Shepard’s greatest gifts as a playwright is his ability to take a time honored tradition, myth, or signifier (the hat for example), and then surround it in an environment that is simultaneously a part of and apart from the setting. No matter how popular or widely accepted and valued the myth, Shepard is courageous in playing with, redefining, or dismissing the myth’s hold on our collective psyche. Tight-lipped, steel-constructed cowboys are now replaced with a chatty, washed-up art dealer no longer able to remain vital in the business world or valuable to the prairie that once made him. Shepard clearly has no qualms about reworking or even casting aside a traditional form to reinvent and reinvigorate its “scraps” for something more powerful and socially provocative.

In an interview discussing his art and origin Shepard notes that his dramas

come from the country, they come from that particular sort of temporary society that you find in southern California, where nothing is permanent, where everything could be knocked down and it wouldn’t be missed, and [from] the feeling of impermanence that comes from that—that you don’t belong to any culture. (qtd. in Seigel 236)

Shepard’s commentary on art is telling and appropriate in the context of *Kicking a Dead Horse* and its theme of loss, or perhaps more accurately disposability. Clearly Shepard is well versed in the traditional mythic art forms of drama and the West; but how do “legendary” narratives apply to a culture that is largely defined by temporal things and expiration dates? These two ideas are at odds yet surprisingly and satisfyingly complementary when dealing with the modern drama of Sam Shepard.

Struther’s inability to revisit the West he once knew physically, and his ill-fated attempt to capture it in words, demonstrates the dire situation and unstable identity he now must attempt to reconcile (37). This claptrap language of nonsense is all that Struther has left in his nearly expired life. He has been stripped down, diluted, and disillusioned with the very ideas he once held so close and dear to his essential being. His struggle to let go of his hat is not some type of Thoreauvian show of simplicity; indeed, Struther’s actions appear desperate and futile as he struggles to regain his entire being and identity. Tossing aside the hat is not only an act of surrender for Struther, but an admittance of impermanence. Unlike the preserved Russells and Remingtons that are now tucked away in posh private collections and climate-controlled museums, Struther’s life is just steps away from falling down into an abyss.

Ultimately, Struther loses all—saddle, spurs, hat, horse, and then tragically, his life—but Shepard does not entirely dismiss the revitalization of his soul due to art’s inspiration. No stranger to

Samuel Beckett and the rewarding ambiguity of absurdist drama, Shepard surprises Struther and the audience when the woman dancer graces the stage, accompanied by the traditional song “Didn’t He Ramble.” As Struther ponders his history of loss, music and dance resonate from the stage. In an environment of hard luck and cursed fate, our dancer is an example of unadorned grace. Shepard’s notes describe, *“a Young Woman dressed only in a sheer slip, and with bare feet, emerges slowly from deep in the pit, wearing Hobart’s western hat.... She moves slowly upstage right, away from Hobart, and stops, gazing out at the horizon line”* (43). Her ethereal simplicity, when one considers the sparse nature of Struther’s prairie and life of diminished options, is appropriate. She is a ghost, a figment of an overactive and desperate imagination but central and important to this text. Her movement *“upstage right”* and *“away from Hobart”* (43) separates her from the deserted and dying cowboy.

On stage, Young Woman’s distance from Struther accentuates the characters’ contrasts. A relic of the West, Struther appears physically ineffective and mentally expired. Yet, that is not to say that the play is devoid of hope. True enough, Struther’s sad plight may very well be a resounding death knell for the Western genre proper rung by Shepard: yesterday’s Westerns of the antiquated singing cowboy are presumably headed to a better place. But, Young Woman’s dance with Dr. John’s accompaniment sends a note of hope when it comes to the outlook of art’s vitality. Merely a mortal, Struther faces a fate that is terminal and dark, but that does not dismiss the longevity and life of

art itself in the music and dance swirling about him. Struther’s time draws near, much like the diminished patriarch Dodge in *Buried Child* or the troubling fraternal fate of Austin and Lee in *True West*; yet, Shepard’s Young Woman cannot be contained in the domestic dungeons of a dilapidated living room or a ramshackle kitchen. Young Woman remains enigmatically elusive and impossible to confine—she is the true Spirit of the West. Thus, Shepard simultaneously terminates one aspect of the Old West only to invigorate and invent another dimension of its mythos.

One way to better understand how the play still salvages the power of art, is seen through an insightful reading of Gabriella Varro’s “Versions of the Clown in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and Sam Shepard’s *Kicking a Dead Horse*.” Varro concisely and coherently focuses on the clown figure in the drama of Beckett and Shepard. Varro notes how the clown is a character of “outcast status” (206) that captivates in an audience and argues that the “audience feels compelled to laugh at the ‘otherness’ of clowns” and that these characters of the absurd “face a void, since they lack any kind of spiritual affirmation... they linger on in a senseless universe that seems to provide no justification for their existence, or for the prolongation of their struggles” (207). Well versed in Beckett and Shepard, Varro notes how the former was both an inspiration and influence for the latter, and focuses nicely on the void that the characters of the absurd orbit. For Varro, Struther is a “starving

artist” in search of “authenticity,” or at the very least inspiration (213).

One of Varro’s many provocative points is an endnote where she explains the representation of the dancer:

The woman remains a mystery, since she is unnamed, unrecognized, and speechless—this describable in mostly negative terms—yet there is a distinct force attached to her presence. She is like mother earth, the spirit of the land, or a figment of memory, the abstract representation of past itself. The fact that Hobart ignores her presence takes on relevance exactly because of these possible symbolic associations inherent in her figure. (222)

I concur with Varro’s interpretation and think that Young Woman is very much a vivid and mysterious presence in Shepard’s play. I also agree that Varro’s interpretation of Young Woman as “mother earth” or the “spirit of the land” is pleasing and plausible when one considers the role of the land in the text. In any Western narrative the land serves as a rich metaphor of possibilities of opportunity, hardship, redemption, and even death. The prairie landscape of this play echoes the classic Western’s cinematic obsession with endless vistas provided by directors such as John Ford and Howard Hawkes, but it also provides—thanks to Young Woman’s presence—a rich enigma for the audience to ponder.

But how does land matter in a drama where the protagonist begins as a diminished thing and only continues to evaporate as this drama unfolds? In short, the land of the West fits this drama of abandonment. Tompkins summarizes the land of Westerns in general as an “environment inimical to human beings, where a person is exposed, the sun beats down, and there is no place to hide. But the negations of the physical setting—no shelter, no water, no rest, no comfort—are also its siren song” (71). Tompkins’s vivid portrayal of the terrain in the Western genre is harsh, yet at the same time also appealing in its presentation. Her invocation of mythology’s deadly siren is appropriate when we consider this play and its clever use of song and dance. In a play where so much is lost, jettisoned and forgotten, perhaps that very “mystery” that Varro notes is what keeps the West dead but the art forms of drama, music, and dance very much alive.

As Dr. John’s cover of “Didn’t He Ramble” plays, and Young Woman graces the stage dancing in space, we see more than a somber dirge or echo of the past. In truth, Young Woman might very well be Shepard’s subversive way of allowing the women to steal the show. Numerous critics have attacked the classic Western for its shallow representation of women, and, when one considers the popular Westerns of yesterday (and sadly many “conventional” Westerns that eschew the more complex narratives of the New West), there is little argument. It appears, when we consider the plodding nature of Hollywood and its affinity for producing largely formulaic Westerns

like James Mangold’s *3:10 to Yuma* (a remake released in 2007) or the Coen Brothers’ *True Grit* (another remake released in 2010) that the conventional Western, much like Struther, wheezes on, not quite dead yet. Ironically, in a genre where most characters revolve around men’s conflicts and mortality, in Shepard’s play it is a woman that momentarily resuscitates the genre and its male protagonist.

Struther diminishes physically and verbally yet his contrasting foil, Young Woman, returns his hat from the grave “directly behind him” (44). Young Woman’s action is more than a mere hat trick. Her gesture with the Western icon of the cowboy hat subtly reestablishes a sense of order and hope for the Western. Struther is totally unaware of her presence even as she delicately places his once discarded hat on his wrinkled pate. Shortly thereafter she returns to the pit and disappears. Struther is perplexed by the reappearance of his treasured hat and confesses, “I can’t believe I did that again. I keep doing these things over and over again and nothing changes” (45). Keeping true to form and word, Struther throws away the hat—again. Struther is a mildy sympathetic and simple character, whereas Young Woman is a rich signifier of ambiguity which confuses Struther and keeps the audience engaged, perplexed, and attentive.

Struther’s futile actions reap little reward as he encroaches upon his ominous end, while the whimsical and enchanting presence of Young Woman and the music she dances to provide hope while Struther (deciding to venture down and retrieve his beloved hat) falls victim to the plummeting hulk of a horse at the grave’s floor. After the horse

slams into its grave, atop Struther, the proverbial dust settles and all the audience hears is,

Oh, didn't he ramble,
Oh, didn't he ramble
Rambled all around
In and out of town.

Oh, didn't he ramble
Oh, didn't he ramble
He rambled till those butchers
Cut him down. (67)

Young Woman exits the stage, but the song remains. Shepard instructs that lights all go black (before the curtain call), but the music lingers. Butchered and cut down by the brutal landscape of the West, Struther has unknowingly aided in his own demise by a combination of lack of foresight and gullible nature towards over-exaggerated myths—the same myths that most likely made for some fine camp fire narratives and abounded at one time in popular cinema. But for the loss of an aged narrative, another art form thrives and comes to the fore in this play: music.

In *The Renaissance*, aesthete thinker and sage Walter Pater asserts boldly, “All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music. For while in all other kinds of art it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form, and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort to obliterate it” (86). Pater’s

hierarchical comment suggests that of all the forms of artistic expression, music is not only a universal goal but an achievement of the text. Though Pater’s observation is an old one, it still applies to Shepard’s drama and what he is doing by the use music and how it salvages the play from total meaninglessness.

Indeed, the role of music as the highest form of art does not end with Pater. Stephen Rea (the actor who first performed the role of Hobart Struther) writes a brief but illuminating foreword to the play and quotes Samuel Beckett as saying, “Music is the highest art form—it’s never condemned to explicitness” (xi). Rea’s quote from Beckett not only connects the dots of lineage between Beckett and Shepard, but also strongly invokes the Paterian belief in music’s pleasingly seductive qualities as it repudiates the explicit in favor of the implicit or ambiguous. Music is the very stuff of the inexpressible that makes it so valuable—a fine foil to Struther’s near infinite dialogue.

What makes Shepard’s musical selection particularly exciting is the genre of music he chooses for this play and its character. Instead of Shepard’s typical use of rock and roll (a form he as a musician and playwright is no stranger to) he opts for an old and more established genre, folk music. Rock music is exciting, sexy, and at best inspiring. It is infused in commercials, television programs, sporting events, and cinema. But, as attractive as it is, when compared to other genres it is relatively new and temporal. Hits in the rock world make a vibrant splash but are soon replaced by other equally or more vibrant sonic splashes in weeks or days depending on the tune’s virility. Though

rock music’s palate can range from sharp and edgy to glamorous and slick, rock is largely a disposable form. However, in comparing the finite life of Struther and his beliefs in the Western mythos to the considerably older standard “Didn’t He Ramble,” the music enforces a sense of duration.

In “Sam Shepard as Musical Experimenter,” David DeRose tracks Shepard’s involvement and fascination with music throughout much of his career. DeRose’s essay is solid and explores Shepard’s experimentation in rock and jazz, and their rhythmic cadences in his language. A truly fascinating read, DeRose’s article cites a quotation from Shepard where his focus is on Bob Dylan, and the mythic qualities surrounding the poet-songwriter:

Myth is a powerful medium because it talks to the emotions and not to the head. It moves us into an area of mystery. Some myths are poisonous to believe in, but others have the capacity for changing something inside us, even if it’s only for a minute or two. Dylan creates a mythic atmosphere out of the land around us. The land we walk on every day and never see until someone shows it to us. (qtd. in DeRose 230)

What makes DeRose’s comment on Dylan’s mythology impressive is his observation of Shepard’s ability to link music and myth together. DeRose’s quote from the playwright is thorough, and it outlines how Shepard fully understands the “powerful” stuff of myth, and its emotional impact on its listeners. It can change listeners’ lives, even if only for a moment or two. In the same way that Dylan’s artistry alerts

us to the land's stories, so too do Struther and Young Woman. Collaboratively, the pair (one extremely chatty and the other silent) illustrates the spectrum of the good and the bad, the rich and the poor, or the treasure from the trash of the land and its relation to the Western. Yet, as noted this impact can be a toxic one as well, as Shepard underscores the darker side of these narratives.

By invoking the standard “Didn’t He Ramble” in the middle and conclusion of the play Shepard is making a statement: in the disposable world of cowboy mythology, rock star celebrity, and the fragility/meaningless of life, some “greats” or Arnoldian touchstones still weather the storm. The fickleness of today’s culture of convenience is “a butcher” and as a result Struther remains a casualty, but due to the potency of music, this art form dismisses discard and lives beyond the drama’s lamentable protagonist. The song’s lyrics are straightforward. Yet, it might be the song’s simplicity and commentary on mortality that make the song resonant. The song’s haunting tune and sobering lyrics endure and outlast horse, hat, and Struther.

In a revealing essay on Sam Shepard in *Updating the Literary West*, critic Mark Busby notes Shepard’s preoccupation with myth and how it resonates in American culture. Busby contends, “[Shepard’s] work demonstrates over and over again the two sides of the American myth: the hope and promise of the dream of regeneration on the American frontier and the recognition that the dream has often been violent and destructive, that it appears as a ‘lie in the mind’

continuing to entrap and destroy” (513). Busby’s focus on the beguiling myth proves a cautionary observation, and one that keeps Shepard’s work vital, unpredictable, and honest. In *Kicking a Dead Horse*, it might very well be this daring play between “regeneration” and “destruction” that engages audiences of myth-making in the West.

Shepard revels in the space between “regeneration” and “destruction” and though the Western hero and his horse perish, the playwright’s use of Western paintings and folksy, old-time music reassures us in the creation and complexity of modern art. For Shepard, his play interrogates the easy fix of nostalgic myth yet invests in the resiliency of art. The West’s canned imagery of the past is not renewable and is unable to sustain Struther—these same elements are employed but only to be quickly dispatched. Yet the elements of dance and song are not as easily dismissed and beautifully illustrate the resilience and endurance of art. Shepard denies his audience a hero riding off into the sunset and both the cowboy and horse succumb to realities of the environment, but in this drama the art rambles on. ©

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